

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“In Life and In Death, We Belong to God: When Life Feels Like Death”
Ezekiel 37: 1-14
5th Sunday in Lent
April 2, 2017

The prophet Ezekiel and his fellow citizens from Judah had suffered multiple traumas. Their capital city of Jerusalem had been destroyed; the temple which had been the center of their worship and their identity as a people was in ruins; they had been carted off into captivity in Babylon.

In the midst of this physical and spiritual devastation, Ezekiel has a vision. It was a vision that took place in a landscape full of death.

What would it be like to be given the gift of being able to see into the future and then bring that vision of the future back to the present day?

Ric Elias, the co-founder and CEO of Red Ventures and the founder of the Golden Door Scholars program, was given this gift. In a TED talk which Ric gave in 2011, he reflected upon the gift which came to him as he sat in seat 1D on United Airlines flight 1549 when it crash-landed in the Hudson River.

“Imagine a big explosion as you climb through 3,000 ft. Imagine a plane full of smoke. Imagine an engine going clack, clack, clack. It sounds scary.

Well, I had a unique seat that day. I was sitting in 1D. I was the only one who could talk to the flight attendants. So I looked at them right away, and they said, "No problem. We probably hit some birds." The pilot had already turned the plane around, and we weren't that far. You could see Manhattan. Two minutes later, three things happened at the same time.

The pilot lines up the plane with the Hudson River. That's usually not the route.

He turns off the engines. Now, imagine being in a plane with no sound.

And then he says three words. The most unemotional three words I've ever heard. He says, "Brace for impact." I didn't have to talk to the flight attendant anymore.

I could see in her eyes, it was terror. Life was over.

Now I want to share with you three things I learned about myself that day. I learned that it all changes in an instant. We have this bucket list, we have these things we want to do in life, and I thought about all the people I wanted to reach out to that I didn't, all the fences I wanted to mend, all the experiences I wanted to have and I never did. As I thought about that later on, I came up with a saying, which is, 'I collect bad wines.' Because if the wine is ready and the person is there, I'm opening it. I no longer want to postpone anything in life. And that urgency, that purpose, has really changed my life.

The second thing I learned that day — and this is as we clear the George Washington Bridge, which was by not a lot —

I thought about, wow, I really feel one real regret. I've lived a good life. In my own humanity and mistakes, I've tried to get better at everything I tried. But in my humanity, I also allow my ego to get in. And I regretted the time I wasted on things that did not matter with people that matter. And I thought about my relationship with my wife, with my friends, with people. And after, as I reflected on that, I decided to eliminate negative energy from my life. It's not perfect, but it's a lot better. I've not had a fight with my wife in two years. It feels great. I no longer try to be right; I choose to be happy.

The third thing I learned — and this is as your mental clock starts going, "15, 14, 13." You can see the water coming. I'm saying, "Please blow up." I don't want this thing to break in 20 pieces like you've seen in those documentaries. And as we're coming down, I had a sense of, wow, dying is not scary. It's almost like we've been preparing for it our whole lives. But it was very sad. I didn't want to go; I love my life. And that sadness really framed in one thought, which is, I only wish for one thing. I only wish I could see my kids grow up.

About a month later, I was at a performance by my daughter — first-grader, not much artistic talent —Yet!

And I'm bawling, I'm crying, like a little kid. And it made all the sense in the world to me. I realized at that point, by connecting those two dots, that the only thing that matters in my life is being a great dad. Above all, above all, the only goal I have in life is to be a good dad.

I was given the gift of a miracle, of not dying that day. I was given another gift, which was to be able to see into the future and come back and live differently (italics mine). (1)

Not many of us have dramatic experiences where we literally look death in the face in the way that Ric Elias and others on Flight 1549 did.

And yet...

And yet...

Who among us has not faced smaller deaths...the kinds of deaths that, as Ric said, are a part of preparing us all our lives for the moment that comes to every human being when we take our last breath on this earth?

Because, you know, there are times in all our lives, if we log enough days on this earth, when life feels a lot like death.

...grief- that knot in your chest that makes eating and sometimes even breathing (the very act of inhaling and exhaling) feel almost impossible, the feeling of moving through life in slow motion, the feeling of swimming through Jello, the feeling of going about one's daily activities while seeming to be in a trance,

...a chronic illness or being the primary caretaker for someone with a chronic illness and its attendant sense of being incredibly lonely and parched,

...losing a job or going through a divorce,

...getting ready to graduate and not knowing what your next step will be while the atmosphere on campus is electric with the excitement of friends who are elated about their grad school acceptances and crowing about their fantastic job offers,

...the sense that nothing you can do will every completely please your parent or your stepparent, your teacher, your coach, or will admit you into the circle of friends that you so long to be a part of,

...the energy that it takes to say “I’m fine” when someone asks, “How are you?” and you really aren’t, you aren’t fine at all...everything about your life is as dry and as disconnected and as brittle as the bones in Ezekiel’s vision.

When we are experiencing these times when life feels like death, Ezekiel invites us to look into the future with him.

Look into the future so that your imagination might take you to the place where the Spirit of God, the God to whom we belong in life and in death, brings about a miracle, the miracle of not only connecting the toe bone to the foot bone to the heel bone to the ankle bone to the shin bone to the knee bone to the thigh bone to the hip bone to the backbone to the shoulder bone to the neck bone to the head bone but of breathing *ruach* – God’s Wind-Breath-Spirit – that is nothing less than a resurrection to a new life that is not the same life, as Ric Elias would attest, but a life lived differently, a resurrected life that God gives to us both as a truth-full story that gets repeated on Easter and on Pentecost and as a gift of divine grace in which we find the ability to breathe even in the midst of grief, to love and to feel loved in the midst of loss, to find faith once again in the midst of despair.

I will close simply with this word to those of you who came to church this morning (or who are sitting at home listening on the radio or internet or watching and listening to the service via live streaming on Facebook) and who at this moment are feeling more dead than alive. Here is the word: tell somebody how you are feeling. Find somebody you trust and tell them. (Your pastors are here to listen.) It is hardest thing in the world to do. We are like the exiles in Babylon. We often think that we have to live with the sadness that is as deep as the marrow in our bones. We try to fill up our spiritual emptiness by working hard, collecting stuff, making our Babylons as nice and comfortable as we can. Having the courage to tell someone whom you trust what you are feeling or not feeling is perhaps the first step to taking your stand beside Ezekiel and hearing and trusting this good news, “Thus, says the Lord, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live.”

1. https://www.ted.com/talks/ric_elias/transcript?language=en.